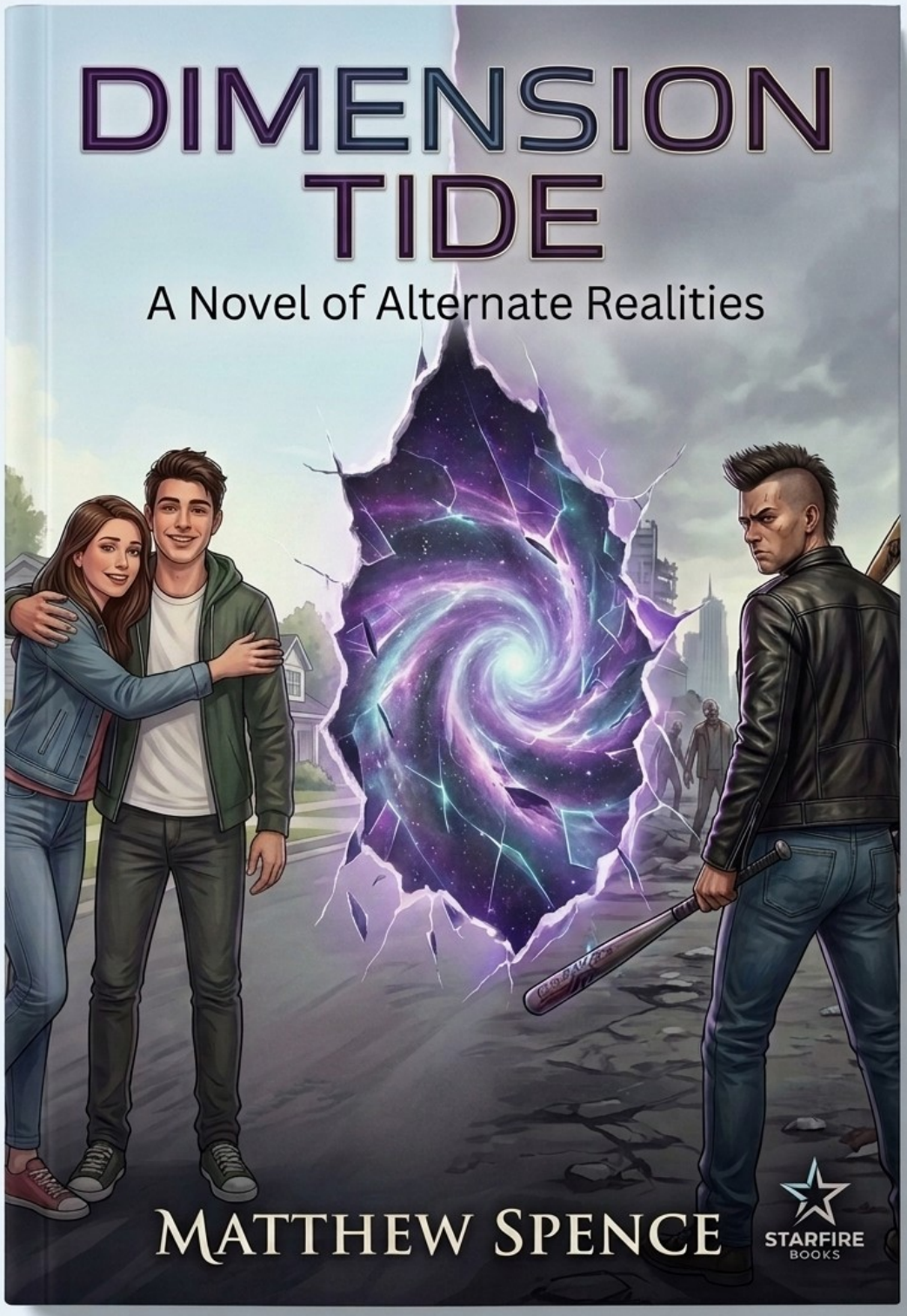
DIMENSION TIDE
A Novel of Alternate Realities
MATTHEW SPENCE
STARFIRE BOOKS

DIMENSION TIDE

By

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Chapter 1: The Bursting Bubble

The sky above Tierrasanta was a mocking, flawless blue, but John Hanson was suffocating in white noise. He wasn’t supposed to be here. He was pressed against the cracked brick facade of an alternate-reality stucco home, the static sting of the dimensional rift still buzzing in his teeth. The air smelled like burnt hair and ancient ash.

"Move," a voice hissed.

A hand yanked him backward just as a massive, hairless creature with eyes like dying embers lunged through the gray haze. John stumbled over the blackened remains of what used to be his girlfriend’s lawn. He hit the dirt hard, his phone slipping from his grip. The screen flickered violently, displaying a final, scrambled text from Steve back home: *DIMENSIONAL INSTABILITY DETECTED. FOG IS PHASING. BUBBLE COLLAPSING IN—*

The numbers glitched into broken symbols before he could read the countdown.

"I said, *move*!"

Jenn swung. The aluminum baseball bat connected with the creature’s skull with a sickening, metallic *crack*. The beast yelped, its form dissolving into greasy black smoke that rolled into the dense fog.

John scrambled to his feet, chest heaving, staring at his savior. "Jennifer?"

She didn't look like the girl who sat next to him in AP History. This girl—Jenn—was lean and hardened, her skin mapping a history of sunburns and scars. Her hair was hacked short and tied back with a strip of dirty flannel. She held the bat like a natural extension of her arm, her eyes scanning the shifting mist with a cold, predatory focus.

"I don't know who Jennifer is," she rasped, not lowering the bat. "But you’re a ghost. You smell like laundry detergent and clean water. You’re from the other side of the scar."

"The fog," John stammered, pointing blindly behind him. "I came through the fog in Jennifer’s yard. I just… I stepped through and the world snapped."

Jenn’s eyes softened, just a fraction, revealing a profound, crushing exhaustion. "The echo. I saw her house appear out of nowhere ten minutes ago. Whole. Clean. Like a phantom limb." She wiped a streak of ash from her forehead. "But the window is closing. Look."

She pointed to the swirling perimeter of the hemisphere. The white, cotton-like fog wasn't just shifting; it was vibrating. The edges were fraying, sparks of violet electricity arc-welding themselves to the dead earth. John sprinted toward the perimeter, his heart hammering against his ribs. He threw himself at the white wall.

Smack.

It was like hitting solid plexiglass. The tingle of ozone shocked his fingertips, throwing him backward onto the scorched grass. He scrambled up and hit it again, throwing his shoulder into the barrier. Nothing. The fog had solidified.

"No, no, no," John muttered, panic finally clawing up his throat. He hammered on the wall. "Steve! Mike! Can you hear me?!"

Through the opaque, pulsing barrier, he could see faint, distorted silhouettes. The sunny, suburban simulation of Tierrasanta was right there, just inches away, separated by a layer of bleeding physics.

On the other side of the glass, the air in Jennifer’s backyard smelled like ozone and cut grass.

"John!" Jennifer screamed, her hands plastered against the outer wall of the hemisphere. The fog felt freezing cold to the touch, vibrating with a frequency that made her fillings ache.

"Get back!" Steve yelled, grabbing her jacket sleeve and pulling her away. He was hunched over his tablet, his thumb flying across the screen as lines of code redlined into the crimson zone. "The localized atmospheric density is spiking. It’s creating a localized event horizon. If you touch it while it’s phasing, it’ll shear your fingers right off!"

"We can't just leave him in there!" Jennifer’s voice cracked. The grounded, therapeutic calm she inherited from her parents had completely shattered. "He went in to look for me because my phone was dead! Steve, fix it!"

"I'm trying!" Steve adjusted his glasses with a trembling hand. "The drone data showed a massive thermal spike before it melted. The rift is an anomaly—a temporary bridge between two asymmetric dimensional coordinates. But it's unstable. It’s like a soap bubble. It expanded, it equalized, and now it's contracting."

A deafening screech tore through the suburban quiet, drowning out the distant sound of a neighbor's lawnmower. A battered yellow van peeled around the corner, its tires smoking as it slammed to a halt against the curb. The engine died with a sound like an angry chainsaw.

Mike kicked the driver’s door open and tumbled out, a heavy-duty wrench in one hand and a modified car alternator in the other. His sleeveless denim vest was stained with grease.

"Tell me I didn't just see what I think I saw on the local scanner," Mike panted, sprinting up the driveway. He stopped dead, staring at the terrifying dome of white static devouring Jennifer’s house. "What the hell? Is that… a cloud?"

"It’s a dimensional tear, Mike," Steve said, his voice terrifyingly clinical. "And John is on the other side."

Mike’s eyes went sharp and dark, the lazy, comic-relief persona vanishing instantly. The ghosts of his past—the mysterious disappearance of his father and the secrets his mother was forced to keep—seemed to harden his jaw. He looked at the dome, then at Steve’s tablet.

"How long do we have to get him out?" Mike asked quietly.

Steve swallowed hard, looking at the rapidly decaying wave models on his screen. "The quantum decay rate is accelerating. The bubble is collapsing. If we don't find a way to anchor the rift and pierce the barrier from this side within forty-eight hours… the bridge snaps forever. John will be trapped on a dead earth."

"It's hardening," Jenn said, her voice entirely devoid of pity. It was the voice of someone who had accepted the cruelty of the universe a long time ago. "The rifts do that. They tease you with a glimpse of what used to be, and then they lock you in the tomb."

John turned away from the barrier, his breathing ragged. The pristine, sun-drenched neighborhood he had lived in his entire life was gone, replaced by a gray, skeletal wasteland.

"We can't stay here," Jenn said, hooking her bat into a makeshift holster on her belt. "The noise from the rift phasing draws things. Scavengers. Slavers. And worse."

"Slavers?" John asked, the word tasting like lead in his mouth.

"The war didn't leave many good people behind," she said, crouching low and gesturing for him to follow her into the ruins of the suburban street. "You want to survive long enough for your friends to figure a way through that wall? Then you do exactly what I say."

John looked back one last time at the pulsing, white barrier. Somewhere, just inches away, his friends were fighting to bring him home. He closed his eyes, took a breath, and stepped away from the light.

"Lead the way," John said.

Chapter 2: The Ash on the Asphalt

The gray wasteland of Tierrasanta looked like a photographic negative of John's home. The stucco on the houses was peeling away like sunburnt skin.

"Keep your head down," Jenn whispered, her hand dropping to the aluminum bat at her hip.

They ducked behind the rusted shell of an old sedan. Across the cracked asphalt of what should have been a quiet cul-de-sac, three figures were picking through the debris. They wore heavy canvas coats reinforced with duct tape and carried sharpened pieces of rebar.

"Scavengers," Jenn breathed. "They track the dimensional echoes. They know when a house from your side briefly materializes, it leaves behind clean food, medication, or tools before the bubble snaps shut."

John felt his pulse hammering in his throat. "Can we talk to them?"

"Only if you want to end up traded for a gallon of filtered groundwater," she shot back. "The war broke the grid, then it broke the people. Watch their patterns."

One of the men stopped, his head snapping toward their car. He sniffed the air, narrowing his eyes at the faint scent of laundry detergent still clinging to John's clothes. He pointed his rebar spear directly at their hiding spot.

"Run," Jenn commanded.

They sprinted down the middle of the cracked street as a hoarse shout echoed behind them. John didn't look back. He followed the short-cropped hair and determined stride of an alternate-universe Jenn, leaving his old life behind one shattered block at a time.

Chapter 3: The Baseline Variable

Back in the pristine version of Tierrasanta, Steve’s garage looked like a staging ground for a high-stakes physics experiment. Deconstructed drone parts, high-frequency transmitters, and old cathode-ray oscilloscopes littered the workbenches.

"The atmospheric density data doesn't match a standard quantum rift," Steve said, tapping a pencil furiously against his tablet. "It’s acting like a localized gravitational sinkhole. We aren't just looking at a tear; we are looking at a tether."

Mike was underneath his yellow van, a shower of orange sparks flying from a grinding wheel as he modified the alternator casing. He slid out from under the chassis, wiping grease from his forehead with the back of a gloved hand.

"I don't care about the vocabulary, Steve," Mike said, his voice flat and intense. "Can we punch through it or not?"

"Not with standard radio frequencies," Steve explained, turning his monitor around to show a undulating sine wave. "The barrier is vibrating at a frequency that matches the atomic baseline of John's universe. To pierce it, we need a harmonic counter-frequency. We need an anchor on both sides."

Mike stood up, tossing a heavy wrench into his toolbox. "Then we build a generator that spits out that exact counter-frequency. I've got enough scrap copper, three vehicle batteries, and a modified police band scanner from my uncle's old cruiser. Tell me where to solder."

Steve looked at his friend, seeing the absolute refusal to fail in Mike's eyes. "It’ll require more juice than the garage grid can handle. We're going to blow every fuse on the block."

"Good," Mike grunted, picking up the soldering iron. "John's worth the blackout."

Chapter 4: The Static in the Cellar

While Steve and Mike built their prototype, Jennifer stood in her own kitchen, staring at her dead smartphone. The screen remained pitch black, but every five seconds, a faint, rhythmic pop echoed from the speaker—like static electricity discharging.

She walked down the hallway to her father’s home office. Both of her parents were clinical therapists, but her father had a hobby he rarely discussed: a massive collection of vintage shortwave radios.

Following a sudden intuition, she flipped the heavy toggle switch on the largest receiver. The vacuum tubes glowed a warm, amber orange. Static hissed into the quiet room, but beneath the noise, a low, repeating pattern emerged. It sounded like morse code, but warped by a deep, metallic echo.

She grabbed a legal pad from the desk and began charting the intervals. *Three short pulses. A long pause. Two rapid bursts.*

It wasn't a random transmission. It was a digital encryption signature. She traced the wires from the back of the radio console down through the floorboards. They didn't lead to an external antenna on the roof. They ran straight down into the locked crawlspace beneath the foundation of her house.

Jennifer found the heavy brass key hidden in her father's desk drawer. Her hands shook as she unlocked the low wooden door in the pantry. The air that rushed out didn't smell like a typical San Diego basement; it smelled like the sharp, synthetic sting of an industrial laboratory.

Chapter 5: Bunker Mentality

John huddled in the basement of a collapsed apartment complex, watching Jenn carefully clean a superficial cut on her forearm with a precious drop of clear alcohol.

"Why did the world end over here?" John asked quietly, his back pressed against the cold concrete.

"Too many nations trying to squeeze the same resources," Jenn said, her voice dropping into a low cadence. "Then someone developed atmospheric weapons. They tried to fold space to move troops instantly. It fractured the layer between realities. The sky turned gray, the crops died, and the things in the fog crawled out of the tears."

She looked up at him, her hardened exterior softening slightly. "Your world… is it still clean? Do people still go to school? Do they still argue about stupid things like dress codes?"

"Yeah," John smiled faintly. "Mike calls it a sunny suburban simulation. We laughed at him for it."

"He was right," she murmured. "Cherish the simulation, John. Because once the bubble pops, you can never glue the pieces back together."

A heavy thud echoed from the ceiling above them. Jenn froze, her hand instantly snapping to the handle of her bat. Above them, the heavy, dragging footsteps of a hunting party rattled the loose plaster. The scavengers had tracked them to the ruins.

Chapter 6: High Voltage

The sun had dipped below the horizon in the primary universe, plunging Tierrasanta into a cool, purple twilight. In Steve's garage, a makeshift machine hummed with terrifying power. It was an amalgamation of Mike's heavy-duty alternator, a nest of thick jumper cables, and a satellite dish propped up on a wooden sawhorse.

"The resonance chamber is stable," Steve shouted over the deafening whine of the charging capacitors. "Jennifer! We need you to monitor the thermal output!"

Jennifer sprinted into the garage, holding her legal pad tightly against her ribs. "Steve, stop! Don't turn it on yet!"

Mike kept his hand on the heavy throw-switch of the battery array. "We don't have time to wait, Jennifer! The forty-eight-hour window is shrinking!"

"You don't understand," she panted, laying the pad on the workbench. "The rift didn't just happen at my house by accident. My dad wasn't just a therapist. Before he moved to San Diego, he

worked for a defense contractor called Nexus Dynamics. They were testing dimensional shielding in the eighties."

Steve's eyes went wide behind his glasses. "The crawlspace. The localized atmospheric anchor."

"Yes," Jennifer said, pointing to her notes. "My house sits directly on top of a decommissioned subterranean terminal. If you fire that generator here, you won't just pierce the bubble—you'll trigger a cascading feedback loop that will pull our entire neighborhood into the dead zone."

Chapter 7: The Trading Post

In the gray world, John and Jenn were forced into the open. The scavengers had flushed them from the apartment complex, driving them toward the skeletal ruins of what used to be the Black Mountain Road shopping center.

The McDonald's John frequented was now a fortified trading post, its golden arches twisted and wrapped in rusted barbed wire.

"We need to blend in," Jenn whispered, pulling a grimy canvas poncho over John's clean shirt. "Keep your mouth shut. If they hear your accent—if they realize you don't have the grit of a survivor—they'll tear you apart."

They walked through the broken glass entryway. Inside, desperate survivors traded rusted car parts, dried meats of dubious origin, and jars of murky water. A large man with a scarred face sat on the counter, a shotgun resting across his knees.

John's foot caught on a loose piece of tile. He stumbled, knocking over a stack of empty tin cans. The clatter was deafening in the tense, quiet room.

The scarred man on the counter snapped his eyes to John. He stood up slowly, the shotgun leveling at John's chest. "You're moving too soft, boy. And those shoes don't have a speck of radiation ash on them. Where'd you crawl out from?"

Jenn stepped in front of John, her aluminum bat raised. "He's with me, Vance. Leave him be."

Vance smiled, a cruel, yellowed grin. "He’s a traveler, Jen. I know the look. His skin is too soft. He’s worth a fortune to the collectors in the deep city."

Chapter 8: Subterranean Secrets

Back home, Mike, Steve, and Jennifer stood in the dark crawlspace beneath Jennifer’s house. Flashlights cut through the gloom, illuminating a massive, rusted steel hatch bolted directly into the bedrock. A faded logo for *Nexus Dynamics* was stenciled across the center.

"This is insane," Mike muttered, tapping the steel with his wrench. "The whole neighborhood was built on top of a government lab?"

"It explains why the developer bought the land so cheap in the nineties," Steve said, his fingers flying across his portable terminal as he hooked a data cable into an ancient auxiliary port on the hatch wall. "They didn't fill the bunkers. They just capped them and built stucco houses over the graves."

The steel hatch groaned, heavy hydraulic fluid leaking onto the dirt floor as the seals broke. The door slid open, revealing a concrete staircase descending into a pitch-black abyss.

"If the anchor is down there, we can use it to stabilize the rift without blowing up the neighborhood," Jennifer said, stepping forward with her flashlight.

"I'm going first," Mike said, pulling his uncle's old service flashlight from his belt. "My dad went missing when Nexus closed their local offices. If there are answers down here about why he disappeared… I’m finding them."

They descended into the concrete womb of the earth, the hum of the dimensional bubble vibrating through the walls like a steady, angry heartbeat.

Chapter 9: The Breakout

The fortified McDonald's erupted into chaos. Vance lunged forward, but Jenn parried the shotgun barrel with her bat, sending a blast into the collapsed ceiling.

"Run, John!" she screamed.

John didn't hesitate this time. He grabbed a heavy metal stool and threw it into the path of two advancing scavengers. He tackled Vance from behind just as the man tried to reload, the two of them crashing through a rusted partition into the old kitchen area.

The air in the kitchen was thick with the scent of old grease and wet ash. John scrambled away as Vance swung a heavy fist, grazing John's jaw. The pain was sharp and real, snapping John out of his passive, laid-back instincts. He was the one his friends looked to when things got weird. He had to take charge.

He grabbed a rusted fryer basket from the counter and slammed it into Vance's face. The man stumbled back, howling in pain.

Jenn appeared at the kitchen doorway, her poncho covered in gray dust. "The whole market is turning on us! We have to get back to the rift site! It’s our only exit!"

They burst through the back exit into the alleyway, the gray fog rolling in thick and fast, carrying the distant, terrifying growls of the mutant hounds drawn by the gunfire.

Chapter 10: The Resonance Bridge

Deep inside the Nexus Dynamics bunker, Steve found the main control console. It looked like something out of a Cold War movie—reels of magnetic tape, heavy red buttons, and a massive copper tuning fork suspended inside a vacuum chamber.

"The system is still receiving power from an underground geothermal tap," Steve said, flipping switches that brought bank after bank of green monitoring lights to life. "This is the primary anchor. The bubble at Jennifer’s house is a direct leak from this core."

"Can you bridge it?" Jennifer asked, watching the countdown timer on her phone. *Two hours left before the forty-eight-hour limit.*

"I can," Steve said, his face dripping with sweat. "But it requires an immense amount of manual tuning. Mike, I need you to hook your modified alternator directly into the primary transformer line. We need to force our universe's frequency down the wire."

Mike leaped across the catwalk, securing the heavy jumper cables to the terminal leads. "Do it! It’s redlining, Steve!"

The copper tuning fork inside the vacuum chamber began to vibrate, emitting a high-pitched, crystalline ring that grew so loud it threatened to shatter their teeth. Above them, through miles of bedrock, the white dome in Jennifer's yard began to glow with a brilliant, blinding violet light.

Chapter 11: The Simulation Restored

John and Jenn reached the perimeter of the rift just as the violet energy began to arc across the white wall of fog. The Plexiglas-like barrier was softening, turning back into a shifting, liquid curtain of static.

"It's opening!" John shouted over the roar of the dimensional wind. Through the thinning fog, he could see the clear outline of Steve’s garage, the bright California sun, and the clean green grass of his own timeline.

"Go!" Jenn yelled, pushing him toward the opening.

But behind them, the fog parted. Vance stood there, his face bloody, flanked by five armed scavengers. He leveled a rusted rifle at John's back. "You aren't going anywhere, ghost boy."

Jenn didn't look at John. She turned around, raising her aluminum bat, stepping between the rifle and the rift. "I told you to find out why this happened, John. Go home and fix the world. Leave this one to me."

"I'm not leaving you!" John yelled, grabbing her arm.

"You don't belong here!" she screamed, her eyes fiercely bright against the gray ash. She threw her weight backward, shoving John directly into the violet light of the portal.

The world shattered into a thousand shards of blinding white. John felt himself falling through infinite space, the voices of Steve, Mike, and Jennifer echoing through the void, pulling him back toward the surface of the earth.

He hit the soft, damp grass of Jennifer’s backyard with a bone-jarring thud. The sun blazed overhead. The birds chirped. The lawnmower hummed in the distance. The white dome flared one last time, turned into a single, microscopic point of violet light, and vanished with a sharp *pop*. The bubble had collapsed.

"John!"

A weight slammed into his chest. He blinked past the sunlight to see Jennifer wrapping her arms tightly around his neck, sobbing into his shoulder. She smelled like clean laundry, vanilla, and home.

Footsteps pounded across the grass as Steve and Mike sprinted out from the garage, their faces smudged with soot but stretched into wide, disbelieving grins. Mike dropped his wrench, throwing his arms around both John and Jennifer, while Steve stood over them, adjusting his crooked glasses, blinking back tears.

"You're back," Steve breathed, laughing softly. "The data said... we had less than two minutes. You actually made it."

"We did it," Mike choked out, clapping John heavily on the back. "The alternator held together. We anchored the rift."

John held Jennifer tightly, burying his face in her clean hair, but his eyes locked onto the empty patch of grass where the dome had just been. He felt the cold bruise on his jaw from Vance's fist. The ash on his shoes was real.

Later that evening, the four of them sat in their usual corner booth at the McDonald's on Black Mountain Road. The restaurant was warm, brightly lit, and smelled like fries—completely untouched by the barbed wire and violence of the other side. Mike slid a fresh box of McChickens into the center of the table.

"To the simulation," Mike said, raising his cup of Dr. Pepper. "May it stay boring forever."

They all clinked their cups, but a quiet settled over the table. John looked across at Jennifer, who was staring down at her wrapper, her expression thoughtful.

"Do you think she made it out of the alley?" Jennifer asked softly, looking at John. "My counterpart. Jenn."

John traced the rim of his cup, remembering the fierce, unyielding look in Jenn's eyes right before she pushed him through the void. "She's tough, Jen. Tougher than anything in that wasteland. She told me to fix our world so it never turns into hers. I think she’s still out there, fighting."

Steve tapped a finger against his tablet, looking at a lingering, faint quantum spike on his monitor. "The bunker is sealed, but the anchor is still down there. If she's out there... maybe one day we'll find a way to open a door that doesn't break the world. A real bridge."

Jennifer reached across the table, sliding her fingers into John’s hand. He squeezed back tightly. Outside the window, the sun was setting over Tierrasanta, casting long, golden shadows across the strip malls and stucco homes. The bubble was safe for now, but they all knew the truth: they were no longer just kids surviving the suburbs. They were the keepers of the gate.